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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3264
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6014
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5187
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1670
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 9875
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1742
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS PRIORITY 0403
RUEHLI/AMEMBASSY LISBON PRIORITY 1328
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0450
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 3050
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0354
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0566
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 0817
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3577
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0571
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1015
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3267
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 0973
RUEHCP/AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN PRIORITY 0043
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0604
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 2823
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000460

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/21/2026

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SUBJECT: BRV ON DEFENSIVE AFTER SECRETARY'S REMARKS

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

11. (C) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez called U.S. officials "crazy" in response to Secretary Rice's criticism of the BRV on February 16. Suggesting that USG policy was inconsistent, he said the Secretary's remarks came after a "good conversation" between Assistant Secretary Shannon and Venezuelan Ambassador Alvarez February 14. Vice foreign minister Maria Pilar Hernandez lashed out at the Secretary's statement that international support for a current truckers' strike was useful. National Assembly President Nicolas Maduro, a former transportation labor leader himself, had a particularly defensive reaction to the Secretary's comments. Chavez' strategy to blame everything on the U.S. bugbear may be missing the mark here, as he is failing to appease key constituents such as poor truckers faced with violent crime and poor road conditions. The Secretary's comments put the BRV on the defensive; our strategy is to keep it in this position. End summary.

12. (U) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez called U.S. officials "crazy" on February 15 after Secretary Rice issued remarks critical of the BRV before the House International Relations Committee on February 16. Chavez said that U.S. policymakers "disagreed with each other" because the secretary's remarks followed a February 14 meeting between

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Assistant Secretary Shannon and Venezuelan Ambassador in Washington Bernardo Alvarez, which Chavez called a "good

conversation." "I want to drop this issue, but they are the ones who are attacking us," Chavez exclaimed.

Transportation Strike

¶3. (U) Ambassador Brownfield, WHA/AND director Phillip French, and WHA/AND deputy director Bruce Friedman met on February 17 with vice foreign minister for North America Maria Pilar Hernandez. Following the meeting, Hernandez told reporters that Secretary Rice's statement that international support for a current Venezuelan truckers' union strike was useful suggested that the USG was trying to destabilize Venezuela. Hernandez noted the BRV would request an explanation of the Secretary's comments. National Assembly deputy and MVR organizational director William Lara announced February 17 that the USG had financed a transportation strike in Caracas and Barquisimeto. He called drivers to be alert, saying they could be acting on behalf of the USG without knowing it.

¶4. (C) Antonio Suarez, a member of the executive committee of the Venezuelan Workers' Confederation (CTV), Venezuela's largest, anti-Chavez labor union, told poloff February 17 he aware of ongoing protests in the transportation sector over the lack of security in western Caracas. Francisco Torrealba, a board member of the transport workers' federation, told poloff the strike was a spontaneous local protest calling for more security measures.

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¶5. (C) National Assembly president Nicolas Maduro, a former union leader in the transportation sector, remained on the defensive during his response to the incident. According to press reports, he alleged that transportation strikes, which had occurred in different parts of the country over insecurity and poor road conditions, were inspired or funded by foreign agents. He attributed the violence plaguing drivers to "international agencies" contracting assassins to create conflict in the country. He speculated about CIA involvement. In an apparent attempt to appease Chavez' labor flank, he called for a national dialog next week to keep U.S. government dollars from "turning this into a political problem." In a meeting with the Ambassador February 17, Maduro said the USG was adopting former National Security Advisor Kissinger's tactic of using transport workers to undermine former Chilean President Salvador Allende.

Comment

¶6. (C) When the BRV is uncertain about the direction of U.S. policy, its accusations appear more and more far-fetched. Chavez' claim that he wants to drop the issue with the USG is absurd--he attacks the USG on a daily basis. Moreover, his strategy to blame everything on the USG may fall flat this time because the transportation strike may be an example of Chavez losing support even among his own popular voting base. At the same time, protests over the lack of basic government services such as security and infrastructure have become increasingly common. More importantly, when Chavez is kept guessing about Washington's position, his own policies appear uncoordinated. The Secretary's comments put the BRV on the defensive; our

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strategy is to keep it in this position.
BROWNFIELD